

November 22, 2005

Senator Ken Winters, Co-chair
School Calendar and Tourism Task Force
1500 Glendale Road
Murray, KY 42071

Representative J.R. Gray, Co-chair
School Calendar and Tourism Task Force
3188 Mayfield Highway
Benton, KY 42025

Dear Senator Winters and Representative Gray:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to the issues that arose during the first meeting of the School Calendars and Tourism Task Force.

The major concern voiced by representatives of the tourism industry appears to be that the earlier start dates of schools are detrimental to the tourism season in Kentucky in varied ways. Tourism dollars are lost because families don't schedule vacations in August, and summer employment of students is limited because they must return to school at the beginning of August.

Since the early 1990s, Kentucky has provided its public school systems with the flexibility to design their school calendars to best meet their unique needs. Over the past decade, approximately 30 districts have implemented alternative calendars. Those calendars tend to set the start of the school year in early August, provide fall, winter and spring breaks and build in days that may be used in case of inclement weather. The alternative calendar model also provides many opportunities for students to participate in remediation and special programs that otherwise could not be offered during the regular school year.

Although other school districts have not officially adopted alternative calendars, many have opted to begin their school years in early August, in part to prepare for the likelihood of inclement weather in the wintertime.

Kentucky's requirements for the amount of instructional time to be provided in a school year are among the shortest in the nation. According to the Education Commission of the States, of the 42 states that set parameters for the number of instructional days in the school calendar, Kentucky, along with Alabama, Maine, Missouri, North Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming, requires 175 days or less. The majority of states -- 32 in 2004 -- require 180 days or more. Only six states (Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia) mandate specific start times, outside the beginning of the fiscal year, for school calendars.

School calendars also tend to follow the schedules of higher education institutions, since most teachers engage in learning activities of their own when they are not in the classroom. Summer schedules at most of the state's colleges and universities often run through June and July, and teachers have limited time in which to take classes.

The Kentucky Board of Education recently approved its budget priorities for the upcoming session of the General Assembly. One of the requests is to provide monies to the SEEK formula to provide a total of four additional days -- two instructional and two professional development -- to the school calendar beginning with the 2006-07 school year. The board strongly believes that a longer school year would benefit both teachers and students.

Kentucky's high standards and high expectations for its public schools require intensive work from both teachers and students. Lengthening the school calendar and giving school districts the flexibility to determine the timing of their calendars is one of the best ways to ensure that teachers and students have opportunities to engage in that intensive work.

Kentucky must have a well-educated workforce in order to be competitive among other states, and we must provide opportunities for our young people so that they can be successful as adults. The calendar flexibility that our school districts have enjoyed over the past few years often gives them the means to offer expanded learning options for students.

Staff at the Department of Education is analyzing information from other states to determine their processes and requirements for school calendars. That information will be helpful as we work within the confines of statute and regulation to improve instruction.

We also are sharing the concerns voiced at the task force meeting with school superintendents and other local district staff. We hope to have input from those groups to share with you at the task force's next meeting.

Sincerely,

Gene Wilhoit

Cc: Blake Haselton
Kentucky Board of Education members
Bonnie Brinly
Kyna Koch
Lisa Gross

GW:LYG:mam